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ABSTRACT

This document is a script for a videotape highlighting an oral history project conducted in Sarnia, Ontario (Canada), with Chippewa Indians. The script contains both a narrative explaining the process of implementing an oral history project and producing the tape and vignettes of the oral history as told by the older Indians. The script explains that an oral history project is a good learning experience, especially for older people and native peoples with a history of oral tradition, and that the most successful projects involve the learners from the start in deciding what to talk about and how to go about it. (KC)

ORAL HISTORY:

A Tool for Adult Literacy

Script

Video tape produced by:

Literacy Branch
Ministry of Education
1991

SCRIPT

ORAL HISTORY: A Tool for Adult Literacy
Video tape produced by Literacy Branch,
Ministry of Education in 1991

Eleanor Bird

[The caption below her face identifies her as Eleanor Bird, Chippewas of Sarnia. She is singing a Native song.]

[Various interviewers introducing their interviewees].

David Sobel

[Caption reads "David Sobel, Oral History Consultant, Toronto"].

The main thrust, I think, of using oral history in things like popular education and literacy work is empowerment. People get a sense that they could do oral history, that they are part of history because all their lives, they're being marginalized, all their lives they have been told that history is the story of important people, and they are not important people. And what oral history can do for learners is give them a sense that they are important people.

Frank Antoine

[Caption reads "Frank Antoine and Jennifer Tsuni, Sharbot Lake"].

My Father one time, he uh, I had the chicken pox and he showed me this moose lift. Peel the bark from the bottom up, steep it and drink the tea. The measles will leave in a couple of days through your head, disappear up this way. You peel the bark down, boil it, drink it, the measles leave this way.

David Sobel

A lot of the materials that have been prepared in the past for adult learners and literacy work in general, has not really spoken to the experiences of learners and the beauty of using oral history is, it is very much based on their own experiences and there is tremendous potential for creating materials that speak to them with voices that they understand, with real life situations that

they themselves have experienced. So the learning materials that can be produced using oral history, I think can really excite learners, are not condescending, do not talk about things that are out of their experience, so booklets, pamphlets, posters, there's really no limit to the kinds of learning materials that can be created in all kinds of mixed media for learners in programs that use popular education and oral history. The sky's the limit, really.

Narrator

In Ontario, there are 150 community-based adult literacy programs which help adults learn to read and write. The Literacy Branch of the Ministry of Education provides funding and support for this work. In the spring of 1989, the Literacy Branch along with the Archives of Ontario and the National Literacy Secretariat initiated an Oral History Project to celebrate International Literacy Year 1990. The purpose of the project was to explore how oral history could be used to teach literacy. Twenty-nine programs started oral history projects in their own communities. Learners were active in doing the research and collecting the stories.

John Restakis

[Caption reads "John Restakis, Literacy Branch, Ontario Ministry of Education"].

One of the side products of the Oral History Project was the way in which it promoted literacy work in the community. Very often literacy programs and literacy work in general suffers from a very kind of stereotypical view in the community. And what this project allowed for was for programs and learners and all the participants in the project to highlight an aspect of community-based literacy and community-based learning that really wasn't appreciated in the community, so people could say hey you know these folks are working on the local mill that has a long and highly regarded history and place in this community and they are performing a very valued public service in a way and bringing to light an aspect and an experience of this community that everybody shares and everybody values. And so it builds a kind of a bridge between literacy work and literacy learners and the wider experience of a community that really changes the perspective that community now has of both the literacy program and learners in the literacy programs.

David Sobel

Oral history is the exploration of the past using the spoken word. It's distinguished from written history in that it is done mainly using interviewing techniques and is based mainly on oral testimony. What is exciting about oral history is it tends to be more accessible to the average person than academic history which involves documents, the written word, archives, etc.

Narrator

Why is it more accessible?

David Sobel

Because it is based on the spoken word, it is something everyone can participate in. Everyone knows how to tell a story. Everyone has experiences that are worth talking about; that are worth sharing with other people. And it gives people a sense that they make history; that they're part of history as well. It helps to explode a myth that history is simply about prime ministers or military leaders or important people. People get a sense that everyone is part of history and everyone has a story worth telling and sharing with other people.

Narrator

Sharbot Lake in Eastern Ontario is at the heart of a community which is rich in local history. The Sharbot Lake group chose their subject, bought equipment and started their project. Carol Pepper was one of the staff who was involved in the project.

Carol Pepper

We're following kind of a trail. We're not just sure yet where it's even going to lead us. We are studying the families that first settled in the Sharbot Lake area. And there's several of them but there are others that we're finding and they all come from various areas. So far we've got families from Lake of Two Mountains area, Maniwaki area, the Abinaki people from the Odinack Reserve. So it's touching back to a long trail of history and areas these people have come from and focusing on the Sharbot Lake area and the history that the people there can tell about where they've come from and where they've lived.

Carl Pepper

We had an amazing thing happen. We were introduced to a family that were taken away from Sharbot Lake when they 4, 5 and 6 years old and put in an orphanage and the orphanage gave them away. So the one brother went to Quebec and the other two he's never ever seen again. And he's now 83 years old. It's

a shame that the family is just completely broken up. Because they were Native, they were just given away. We interviewed the man. We have had four generations of his family and the family was so amazed that the father had never ever told them facts that he stated to us on our tape recording. We were just completely amazed at the story of the family and the father's history.

Carol Pepper

That's why I say we really never know where it's going to take us. Because one contact will tell another person that we're doing this oral history and they'll say, "We know somebody in so and so who's from there", and they may have a piece to add, so we may find ourselves in Napanee or who knows where. Still putting our area's history together.

Following the history is a great motivator for everyone. Everyone has something to add to it. They have family members or friends or they'll have photographs they want to share and some people have skills they really want to try out... interviewing and typing. So many things can be involved. But it's been a great motivator. I think without the oral history it wouldn't be the same because of the cultural base of our group.

Jennifer Tusni

Supposing I went out into the bush and got lost and started to panic. What would you suggest in a situation like that?

Frank Antoine

Sit down.

Jennifer Tusni

Sit down? And then what?

Frank Antoine

Calm down, sit down and think. Remember where the sun was when you went in. Or remember where the moss was on the tree when you went in. You see the moss years ago only grew on the north side of the tree. But now there's so much acid in the air, it grows all the way around the tree. So you can't go by that no more. No. But the sun is still good to follow.

Jennifer Tusni

What if it's a cloudy day and starting to snow?

Frank Antoine — Don't go in the woods.

Narrator — Sarnia is the ancestral home of the Chippewas of Sarnia band. It is also the site of some of the largest industrial plants in Canada. At one time the band controlled much of the land in this region along the Sarnia river. Today, what is popularly known as chemical valley dominates the landscape.

Narrator — The Chippewas of Sarnia Literacy Group have combined their learning goals with a need to protect their history and preserve their traditions. This oral history project has focused on the recording of words and memories of the community's elders.

Terry Plain — *[Caption reads "Terry Plain, Chippewas of Sarnia Literacy Program"].*

Native people can and have always been able to identify with the oral history type of setting because it has been like this for eons and a lot of the older people are good at telling stories or communicating this particular skill.

[Preparing for interview].
That's good there, OK the setting is fine, I just want to get a setting on this.

Kim Coupall — *[Caption reads "Clarence Plain and Kim Coupall, Chippewas of Sarnia First Nation"].*

It's August 24th, I'm Kim Coupall and I'm interviewing Clarence Plain at his home on the Sarnia Indian Reserve.

Hi Clarence. Can you tell us about the size of the reserve when you were young as compared to what it is now?

Clarence Plain — There was more than 12,000 acres on the whole reserve when I was a little boy. In fact it was bigger than that. I guess, at one time, it used to run right clear to Davis Street where the post office is.

Kim Coupall	Did the industries take up a lot of the land? Is that the reason why...
Clarence Plain	It was all industry...they sold them in later years. Right now we're trying to what you call to protect our land, trying to improve it, keep it clean. Otherwise we'll lose the land if we don't do something about it. Right now they got a few industries and back there...the highway there, the gas station and a few plants in there, build a mini-mall I guess, that's as far as it's going right now.
Kim Coupall	When the large industries first moved into the area, were the people on the reserve happy about this or were they upset?
Clarence Plain	Well, I wouldn't say they were happy, but they were happy they got paid for whatever land they got. But they never got, what you call, what the land was really worth. I think my people didn't really know the value of, you know, the land when they find the sale.
Narrator	Maple Lodge is located in Leeds and Grenville County. Originally built as a poor house for orphan children of the region, this stately old building has since been renovated for use as a Senior's residence. Some of the people who now live here once attended the same public schools together. Using the group interview approach, this project documents their early school experiences. Here, Hazel Pattemore recalls the time when she and her one room school house was struck by lightening.
Hazel Pattemore	The last thing I can remember was the front door was wide open and it looked like fire, the whole doorway.
Group Leader	That's not a very good memory is it?

Hazel Pattemore

And uh, I was thrown right to the floor. My back was all skinned, I hit the floor so hard. And the teacher was in the school too but she was.. there were swing doors, I was at the right hand side she was at the left and of course when the shock came I was knocked right down but she just kind of just went down.. she was knocked right out. So she was screaming for help. And the doctor told us that might have helped to bring me out of it.

Narrator

It was a guiding principle for the oral history project that people learn best when they start from their own experiences. Community literacy groups used their grants to purchase equipment and were giving training workshops to introduce literacy workers and learners to the basic principles of oral history work. Training included how to choose and use equipment, how to document and store tapes, and how to turn oral history materials into innovative resources for adult learning. This process had other important results. It helped learners build a range of new skills making them more confident in their learning abilities.

David Sobel

I think the most important thing is to begin with the experience of learners and finding out what they're interested in. There's no point in running a program that chooses a topic without the input of the learners. So I think it's important before anything gets started to do some exploration with the learners about what interests them, do they want to talk about their own experiences or are there things around them that are of interest to them, their neighbourhoods, perhaps government, perhaps popular education in their own areas, the environment. There really... anything under the sun is worthy of exploration and I think the most important thing is that the learners themselves are interested in that subject and play a major role in shaping how that project is put together beginning with the subject matter.

I think it's important to familiarize the learners with the type of equipment they're going to be using. Since most important is the interviews in an oral history project, I think it is important that the learners become familiar with the tape recorders that they're using, with the microphones that they're using and just with the process of interviewing people. For many learners, that by itself is a very empowering experience. I remember the first time I encountered some learners, they had never really operated a tape

recorder before. So I think simply practising with a tape recorder, becoming comfortable with asking questions and listening to the answers, so that an interview is really a conversation that is committed to tape. So I think familiarizing the learners with the equipment and getting over that barrier of it becoming a technical feat and then feeling comfortable so that they can then ask some interesting questions and get some interesting stories.

Brian Osborne

[Caption reads "Brian Osborne, Oral History Consultant, Kingston"].

Now the equipment is no longer a massive, intimidating tape recorder, it's quite a little cassette, but some people are still nervous of tape recorders so sometimes it is recommended that you put your tape recorder, your little portable down in position, somewhere where you can see it and it doesn't bother the interview process and the microphone is placed on a table close enough to the person so that it picks up the sound. And of course these microphones are very good these days. One doesn't have to worry too much about it. But you don't put a microphone on a bad surface to effect the sound, glass or metal something that is banging on it all the time. Or you use one of these microphones which is perfect for our process. There are a whole range of technical steps that the interviewer can practice in the training process before hand.

Narrator

Buy a good name-brand tape. Use 60 or 90 minute tapes so you don't have to interrupt the conversation. Label the tape right away. Write the name of the interviewer, the person being interviewed, the subject, date and location. In the interview, be a good listener, don't interrupt and be patient. If you have questions, remember them and come back to them later. On the other hand, don't be afraid to encourage people to talk. When the interview is completed, ask the person to sign a release form giving permission to use the interview. Without this permission, the tape cannot be shared with others. Afterwards make a summary of the tape to review afterwards. Programs can decide how to use the taped stories, create a book, a song, a skit... anything that can be part of the learning process.

Brian Osborne

I'd love to see coming out of literacy programs really good community studies and so on, history products. Wonderful. I like it. In fact, the history of this project itself is of interest to me. What this is in 1990 and what it is doing as a whole project is wonderful. The main focus is the learner. The main focus is what the learner gets out of being involved in an oral project such as this.

Narrator

In the summer of 1990, at Geneva Park, a conference was held for learners and literacy workers. People went to workshops to explore the many forms oral history can take.

Barney McCaffrey

[Caption reads "Songwriting Workshop"].

Joe had an idea, right, he had a story he wanted to tell, he had it all written up real nice and we read it and then we started talking about the type of music we wanted to put this story to. Now Joe had definite ideas about what kind of music he didn't want. He didn't want hard rock, for instance. He wanted to make sure that the words came out. We started talking about his story and we came out with some ideas. Everybody put in a little idea of what they thought was important about it and that should go into the song. And little by little we started getting some lines down and believe it or not it didn't take too long to get even some rhymes happening. You know people would say, "Pain... what goes with pain? Blame, sain", and then we would get a word and somebody would put in a line that would lead up to that word. Then as far as the music went, Joe came up and I said, "Now you give me an idea of the kind of melody that you would like to go with this" and we had our chorus down by then. So Joe went on the keyboard here and he gave us a little idea, right, and so we started getting it and pretty soon we had a melody going to the words, see.

Ok here we go now. Open your eyes first...

[Singing]

Open your eyes.
Open your hearts.
And listen to words of pain.

Open your hearts.
Open your eyes.
And you'll see it simple and plain.

Behind closed doors another world lies.
Things that happen, events disguise.
Things that happen, events disguise.

Kristin Metz

[Caption reads "Quilting Workshop"]

Each.. your patch will be this size. And there is material here of different colours. There's ric-rac. There's felt that you can use. You can cut out pieces of felt and put it on this. So you can use any of the materials here. What we're going to do is glue it. Given the skills in this room, we could have probably done sewing, but you don't always have that. You might be working with people who can't sew and this is the kind of thing you can do with people who can't sew. Anybody can do it, and, as I mention, you can even do it with paper when you're just cutting out shapes. So what I would suggest you start with is taking a piece of newsprint here and drawing out the picture as you want it to be.

We use it in a lot of contexts, in adult literacy, ESL, bilingual programs. This kind of work where people are working with pictorial descriptions of the story, first because people might be really skilled, sort of an artistic rendering of the story, and aren't skilled in the language they are working in, the language they are learning, for instance English. It gives them an opportunity to express fully the story that they want to in their own sort of medium with their own strengths and then from that develop a story. Oftentimes we write a story that can be a very, very simple story and create another quilt right next to the picture quilt so that you can look at one picture and find it in the same

position in the story that goes with it and read the story. So then people can read and work with their own stories, the story that they have told.

These are my cousins, these are two heads. [Laughter]. They were outside the house waiting for us to take us to the airport, but I was not able to finish in time to catch my plane so they took us to the airport anyway and we rented a car there and then drove to Montreal so we could catch the plane because we hadn't missed the second plane yet.

Rita Cox

[Caption reads "Storytelling Workshop"].

I've seen a story that I really like. I want to be able to tell it. How does it become mine. People have different learning styles. But I think everybody...it is important that everybody sees a story, that you could see it happening so that you're not just reciting words, but you're expressing, you're painting pictures with words. You're expressing something that you are seeing in appropriate language. There's a special language of storytelling and it's not high sounding language necessarily, it is just appropriate language that fits what you are going to say. It could be just ordinary day-to-day language, but it is somehow coloured by the story you are telling so that the words aren't altogether ordinary.

Michael Cywink

[Caption reads "Mural Workshop"].

At first I didn't know what I was trying to accomplish with this workshop. And then after seeing, I guess, what it is, it is the understanding of how to work together. Like, these people came in from the different directions and workshops and they get together and all of the sudden they're working as a team. I guess that's part of it, that team work of just meeting people and saying, "How do we do this, how do we do that, what goes here, what goes there?"

Participant

This could be good for community contact, not only did they learn to read better or learn to read now but look at what our learners have produced. Often learners think that, gee, I'm the only one who can't read. like, nobody in the whole world is

worse than I am, so when they come and they work with other people, they share their own personal stories and the ice is broken and they realize that they're not alone. If they can do it and produce a beautiful mural, that's great.

Participant There's all sorts of words you can get out of this. Gosh, you could have a month's lesson just off here.

Christine Hoeldke And then they might be able to use those words to tell a story that's their own...that comes from them.

Participant This would be good for tutors too. You could have a learner who's a great artist and says to the tutor, well you taught me how to do something, now let me show you something cause it's a two-way street. Sometimes tutors can get caught up with, I'm the only one imparting knowledge here, but hey, it goes both ways. I think this is great. I would love for our group to do this.

Narrator In November of 1990, the Oral History Project was showcased at a special event at Harbourfront in Toronto. The event began with a week long exhibit of the work of the oral history projects and ended with an evening of readings of the stories collected from across the province.

Sandra van Dyken, a learner from Kingston, read a story called Early Motoring in Georgetown.

Sandra van Dyken

Those were the days. We always had flat tires. We had to stop at the side of the road and go out and get hay out of the field to stuff the tires with hay to get home. The old car, the Russell Knight, had what they called the Gabriel horn. It was a horn that run's off the exhaust pipe and it had one of those felts. The thing flared away like a steam ship whistle, beautiful sounding thing, just like a Mississippi boat. I was abroad one day when we came down to Charco Road, just ready to make the turn across Georgetown, when a pig ran out and it got hit by the car and it wedged that felt from that gabriel horn and all the tires blew out on both sides. We didn't hurt the pig. He ran away. Then we came down main street with that Gabriel horn just going. It wouldn't stop. Both wheels on the left side, stuck with straw. These were some of the great days of motoring.

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January 24, 1992